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Philology Literature and Archæology

Vol. II No. 2

OBSERVATIONS ON
THE PLATFORM AT PERSEPOLIS

BY

MORTON W. EASTON, PH.D.

PROFESSOR OF COMPARATIVE PHILOLOGY IN THE
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

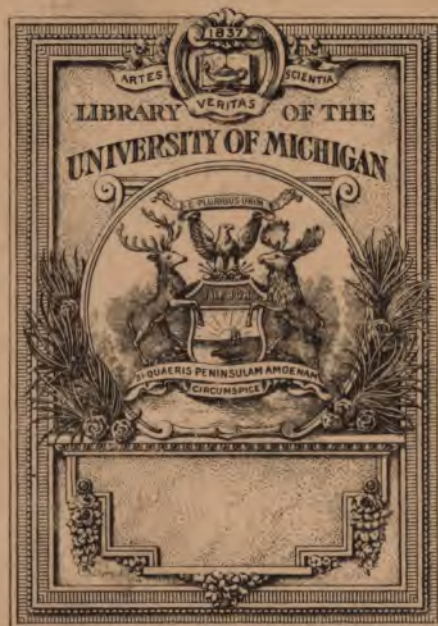
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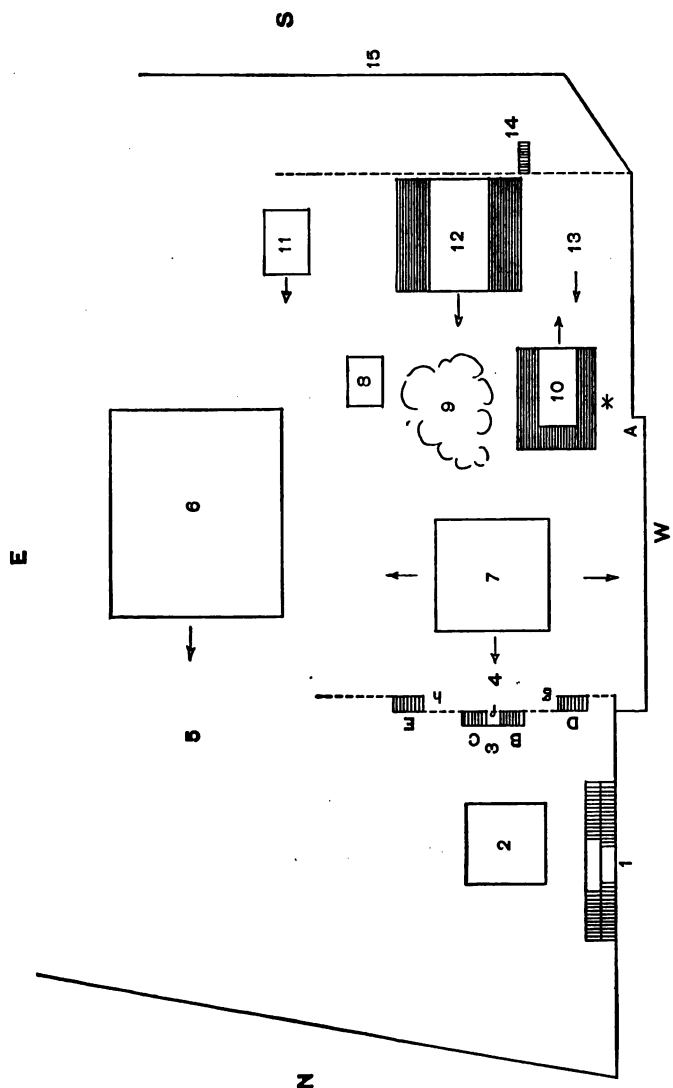
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OBSERVATIONS ON THE PLATFORM AT PERSEPOLIS.

THE monuments dating from Old Iranian times are few in number, and among these few there is but little that can be regarded as specially the product of native Iranian genius. With the important exception of the pillared halls, a form of construction considered to have had its origin among the Medes, and with the further exception of certain architectural details, such as peculiar lintels and capitals, nearly everything that remains betrays the influence of the work of the neighbor and subject-nations on the west,—the peoples of the Euphrates and Tigris basin.

That the Old Iranian peoples should have shown such poverty of invention must certainly seem one of the most remarkable phenomena in the history of art, if their ethnical relations and the ambitious character of the monuments at Persepolis and elsewhere are taken into consideration. Their remoter kinsmen, the Greeks and the Romans, and their nearer cousins, the Indians, all, though in different ways, showed no lack of inventiveness. Perhaps the most marked and instructive contrast is that presented by the Greeks. Both the Greeks and the Iranians produced systems of architecture employing columns, and probably in the same way,—namely, through the transformation of the constructive features of earlier edifices in wood,—but the latter were altogether wanting in the feeling for system and proportion, and, still more, for delicate and significant contour, which finally came to characterize the work of the former. The architecture of the Iranians may perhaps have been the work of some single gifted individual, with the limitations and shortcomings proper to the creation of the individual; among the

Greeks, on the contrary, the history of the development of the entablature marks not individual but national genius, active through a long series of generations. The result is that, in studying the dates of the buildings on the platform at Persepolis, the question of the evolution of the style, so important in archæological investigations in Greece, can hardly be posed.

It is possible that the Iranians were unfavorably influenced by finding already in existence, among the older nations whom they overcame, forms of art so far sufficient for most of their requirements, that they never felt the stimulus of immediate need. And with this should be taken into consideration their very rapid rise to power, so that their material prosperity outran the rate at which a healthful artistic growth could proceed. This consideration should not be overlooked, especially in the study of certain details in the decoration. In this respect, one might draw a parallel between the art history of the Old Iranians and the Romans. But the latter, at a later period of their career, gave ample evidence of native ability; they copied, but transformed with masterly hand. Such is not the character of the later history of the Iranian art.

In studying the question, we should not lose sight of the consideration that not only did the Old Iranians show themselves inferior to each of the kindred races in the impulse to varied material creation, but also in literary ability and even in the impulse to literary production. We need not mention the literature of the Greeks; the Latins, however much they may have borrowed from the Greeks, loved letters, and do not seem so much wanting in native ability as untrue to its real tendencies; the Indian literature, although never of first rate or even of good second rate quality, is at least copious, varied, and ingenious. But the Old Iranian literature is singularly barren, and there is not the slightest reason for suspecting that the brevity of the catalogue of their works is due to loss. The earlier Avesta, were we really to accept the over friendly interpretation of certain enthusiastic scholars, might perhaps be thought to exhibit something of the better features of Indogermanic genius. But

there are no evidences pointing to a popular origin of any part of the Gāthās ; they are as truly the work of an individual as is the Koran. Furthermore, in the Avesta, as in much of their art, the intellectual tendencies of the Iranian peoples resemble those of the Semitic peoples on the west.

Is it not possible that some part of the shortcomings noted above may be attributed to the short duration of the Median and Persian national power? Their prominence began, for the Medes, with the fall of Nineveh, not far from 600 B.C., and ended, for their political and æsthetic heirs, the Persians, at the battle of Arbela, so that the combined periods of the supremacy of the two races cover but little more than three centuries ; not more than one-third of the thousand years sometimes reckoned as the average duration of the life of a people. So far as the Medes are concerned, we are certainly on safe ground ; Cyaxares and Astyages are the only Median rulers who controlled an extensive territory ; the former spent his energies in organizing scattered tribes ; the career of the latter was cut short by the conquest of Cyrus.

Ruins of palaces are found at several places on what, in contradistinction to the territory of the subject races, may be considered peculiarly Median or Persian soil, but none except those at Susa and Persepolis are of great interest to any one not engaged in certain technical investigations, such as the study of flutings and intercolumniations. Yet, despite the extremely ruinous condition of all, it is clearly evident that the same general form prevailed everywhere, so that those on the platform at Persepolis can be taken as the type. Even at Persepolis the ruins are extremely bare, so that the observer must give free rein to his reconstructive imagination, if he is to attain to any proper conception of the original effect : even the walls have vanished, and not a fragment of the original decorations remains except the reliefs on the windows, doorways, and staircases. These, being heavy masses of black marble, have been in part preserved.

Under these circumstances, conjecture has been busy in

restoring the ornamentation, and it is gratifying to archæologists to find these conjectures confirmed in the most striking manner by the recent excavations at Susa. So far as concerns the ornaments, the Susan find consists of painted tiles, originally serving as friezes and wall coverings. These tiles are too well known to need detailed description here; I will merely note in passing that, despite of what Madame Dieulafoy rightly calls their extravagant coloring, a very harmonious effect seems to have been attained. In the Susan buildings the whole wall seems to have been covered with this material in gray and rose, and it may fairly be presumed that this was the case also with the Persepolitan structures, so that the material of the body of the wall was not of the slightest æsthetic consequence; it may well have been something easily handled by the builders, and in consequence easily removed by plunderers.

The question naturally suggests itself: if such tiling was employed at Persepolis, why are not some fragments of it found? But, in this connection, should be taken into account the equally extraordinary lack everywhere, except at Susa, of small articles of every description. Whatever may have been the limits of home invention and production, minor articles of all sorts, so far as they were not connected with idolatrous rites, must have been needed and imported. Persia laid nearly the whole Oriental world under contribution. Plundering, on the most extensive scale, extending to even the small stones or bricks of which the walls were in all probability composed, must have gone on through centuries. (It will be remembered that there was a large Sassanian city not far from the site of the platform.) We can hardly conjecture a purposed clearing up of the surface of the platform, but, had a clearing up been purposely made, the work could hardly have been more thoroughly done.

It would be out of place were I to enter into any protracted description of the separate structures at Persepolis; it is many years since anything new has been found there, and the ruins have been described over and over again. Some review of some

of the principal features of the terraces and of the various buildings is, however, indispensable in order to attain the particular purposes of the following pages; chief among these are the discussion of the probable date of the present arrangement of the platform and the examination of the relations of the separate buildings to each other considered in the light of interdependent and connected structures. So far as I know, nothing has ever been published with reference to the first of these subjects, and only some inadequate and desultory notices respecting the latter.

It is well known that the platform is, in one important particular, unlike certain terraces in the Euphrates-Tigris basin. It was not built up, at least not as a whole, although, as will be shown hereafter, there is some reason for suspecting that this may have been the case with at least some parts of its western edge. The builders utilized an admirably situated spur of Mt. Rachmed. This spur extends westward into the plain some nine hundred feet, and at its western boundary is not far from fifteen hundred feet broad. It may have been smoothed off, or the inequalities may have been filled up, — I do not know how this can be determined, — and has been encased in huge blocks of blackish gray marble, quarried in the mountain slope close at hand. According to the published descriptions, the blocks still retain their original polish, and resemble, in surface finish, the so-called Scotch granite monuments of a modern cemetery — something very hard to believe of such material as limestone, and in such a climate as that of Persepolis. It would seem that unequal weathering could have been escaped only through a miracle, during more than two thousand years of exposure. The blocks were originally joined together by metal clamps; the clamps have rusted away, but the workmanship was so good that it is said that the joints can hardly be detected — another statement difficult to credit, considering once more the lithological character of the material. But we may conclude from all this that the casing is still so complete that nothing is really known of the configuration of the underlying living rock, and in conse-

quence no evidence can be derived from this source as to the contour of the platform when first built, or as to the original levels of the several terraces.

I use the word platform in contradistinction to the terraces of which it consists. Of these there are three, of different dimensions and altitude. The central terrace, whose north and south boundary lines are indicated in the diagram by lines of dots, is forty-five feet high; that forming the south part of the platform is twenty feet high; that on the north about thirty. The outline of the platform is also very irregular, a condition which is perhaps due in part to the original contour of the rock-spur beneath. This is particularly the case with the northern brink. Some of the minor irregularities, and especially those on the north, have been omitted in the diagram, but one—that at the point denoted by *A* on the west brink of the middle terrace—has been carefully indicated, and to scale, for reasons that will appear farther on. It should be added that some of the buildings stand on special terraces of their own, serving the purpose of stylobates, and where this is the case it is possible to suppose alterations in the general level of the part of the platform on which they stand.

On account of the above-described irregularity of the platform, so that no systematic original plan is now perceptible,—the present arrangement being, in many respects, certainly later than the time of Darius,—the impossibility of getting at that which underlies the casing, and the fact that most of the buildings are practically independent of the parts of the platform about them, it is impossible to certainly determine whether changes have been made without special investigations made on the spot, with just this particular point in view. So far as I know, no such examination has been made; there are, however, some considerations founded upon certain peculiarities in the disposition of the ruins as shown on the published plans, which seem to me to be worth setting forth.

The only information that we have with regard to the period at which the construction of the platform was begun is given

by an inscription placed on the perpendicular wall of the south terrace, at the point marked (15) in my diagram. There are really four inscriptions here, all on the same block of stone, two in Old Persian, one in Assyrian, and one in the so-called Scythian. The last one mentioned, that in Scythian, states that Darius built these palaces (or fortresses) on a spot where none had been built before. (The content of the other three inscriptions is very different from this.)

It is singular that the extraordinary location of this inscription has not attracted comment. There is but one place where the platform can be ascended from the plain (apparently; I know nothing of the conditions where its north and south boundary lines meet the slope of Mt. Rachmed.) This is at the staircase marked (1) on my diagram, far away to the north. There are stairs at (14), leading from the middle down to the south terrace, but these afford no present access to or from the plain, and are perfectly plain in character, being in remarkable contrast with the richly decorated stairs at (3) connecting the north with the middle terrace. The stairs at (14) are not even provided with a parapet; those at (3) and at (1) are so grand, that the rather overheated imagination of one critic pronounces them to be without a peer in the world. As I shall attempt to show farther on, the south terrace must, in the time of Xerxes, have been the most retired part of the whole platform, and it is quite as probable as anything else that, during his reign, the stairs at (14) were connected with the service of the royal household. The inscriptions at this point can be read only from the plain, and it does not seem at all probable that any part of the plain so near to the royal residence, and so far from the public staircase at (1), was accessible to every chance stroller.

Furthermore, there are some peculiar features about the orientation of the buildings.

In the diagram, the façades are indicated by arrow-heads, and, in two of the palaces, — those of Darius and of Xerxes, — the location of the small rooms is indicated by shading. (It will be observed, by the way, that the Great Hall of Xerxes, at

(7), has three porticoes, although that facing the north was the most important; that facing the west comes far forward to the brink of the platform, something perhaps imperfectly indicated by the position of the arrow-head marking its location.)

Now if, in the time of Darius, the main approach occupied the place of the staircase at (3), his palace must have presented to this, the principal avenue, its rear, consisting of a number of small rooms. By the words "the place," I of course do not mean to imply that the present stairs and the stairs possibly preceding them must have been built precisely at the same point. The latter may have been somewhere in the vicinity of the site of the former, and perhaps so placed as to be symmetrical with the palace of Darius, although symmetry in determining the central line of staircases seems to have been considered of no great importance. Yet the existing staircase at (3) has its centre very nearly in the central line of the palace of its builder, Xerxes.

Those who have remarked upon the difference between the orientation of the palaces in question have dismissed the subject with the remark that a north orientation is better suited to the climate. It is true that each of them has windows and a large door under the portico, but, in addition, the palace of Xerxes has several windows on the south side, looking over the south terrace, and admitting fully as much air and sunlight from the south as from the north, so that it would seem that the reason assigned is not sufficient to explain the change of orientation. However, this is a matter respecting which it is often very difficult to understand the whims and fancies of our modern neighbors, and it is certain that we do not know enough about the domestic life of the royal family to make it possible to come to any sound conclusions as to this subject.

An explanation of these peculiarities is found, if we suppose that Xerxes extended to the north the platform originally begun by Darius, and made also a complete revolution in the whole. Xerxes was a far more ambitious builder than Darius; he took pains to add a much longer and more pompous inscription to

the palace of the latter ; he built the Propylæa and the Great Hall, while there is no proof that any of the larger buildings on the platform were put up during his father's reign. His motive in this change of orientation was not merely to find room for his grand public structures, but probably also to give to his palace a still more retired position.

This hypothesis, besides assuming a complete alteration in the orientation of the platform, involves the conclusion that Xerxes must have removed stairs originally communicating with the plain at some point on the south, and that the staircase at (1) was also built by him. The inscription tablet at (15) may have been finished by Xerxes, although it bears the name of Darius, that part of it bearing the Scythian legend having been left blank at first. (On the staircase at (3) two tablets have thus been left blank.) For there is something peculiar in the phraseology "where no palaces existed before," which should arrest the attention, whether one has or has not suspicions of extensive alterations in the platform. Probably the first conjecture of any one who is inclined to accept the above hypothesis will be that the site of the inscription is the place of the supposed staircase, but this by no means follows. Inscriptions on the existing staircases of the terraces form a part of the designs of the staircases themselves, so that the tablet must have been removed from its original site, and no one can pretend to conjecture how far it may have been carried. That it bears the name of Darius sufficiently explains why it was not finally transferred to or near to the staircase at (1) (which would seem to be its proper position), on the hypothesis that the staircase at (1) was built by Xerxes.

The stairs at (14) are perfectly plain, presenting precisely the same appearance as that which would be presented by the others were their massive marble casing removed. It would seem that this staircase should have had at least its own parapet, had it formed any important part of the original means of access from the plain ; of course parapets may have been removed when this approach was discontinued ; there may have been another stair-

case between the southern and the middle terrace ; the former terrace may not have been as extensive nor have had the same form during both reigns ; everything is possible. At all events, the absence of the casing can hardly be attributed to Sassanian plunderers, who would certainly not have passed over the other stairs, which are so much more accessible to one coming from the south, and yet still retain their decorations. In passing, it may be noticed that if the platform, as left by Darius, had, as is possible, only the extent needed to contain his own palace, so that the northern terrace and its wide staircases were then not in existence, it must have formed a somewhat defensible position, and might perhaps be designated as a fortress. The palace built by him is placed on an exceptionally high stylobate.

While discussing the reasons that may be assigned for the plain character of this staircase, I will add that the one at (1), leading from the plain to the north terrace, is without an inscription. This may seem strange, but inscriptions are found on the great Propylæa, at (2), not far from its head, and farther on, I shall try to explain the apparent neglect of this important approach.

Under the new arrangements, as we may conjecture, the entrance to Darius' palace was not considered satisfactory. A later monarch put a door and another staircase in the west side, looking towards the edge of the platform, although this alteration made it necessary to turn one of the side rooms into a passageway. This new entrance is at the point marked by a star.

I pass now to the consideration of the mutual relations of the various structures considered as forming one whole.

As already said, (10) is the palace built by Darius, (12) that of Xerxes, (13) that of Artaxerxes Ochus. As Artaxerxes died but a few years before the battle of Arbela, his palace was, in all probability, the last structure erected on the platform. At (11) was another palace, with northern orientation, and at (8) a propylæa, but neither of these bears any inscription, so that the date of their erection is unknown. At (9) are two mounds which have never been explained.

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The ground plan of these palaces is not very unlike that of buildings used as residences in many other parts of the ancient world ; a similarity of construction which is doubtless due to the fact that the difficulty in warming and lighting was everywhere the same. All of them had a great central hall, with traces of many rows of columns, and all probably had small rooms on two or three sides. As at Pompeii, these side rooms are much smaller in comparison with the central halls than would be the case in a modern residence. There is, of course, no trace of anything like an impluvium ; the columns are so distributed as to imply a continuous ceiling. There was probably an upper story, of so much more limited area than the lower as to somewhat resemble what is, in America, called an observatory, and on this a fire altar. The evidence for the upper story and for the fire altar is derived from the tombs, which apparently represent palace façades.

The palace of Xerxes was much larger than that of Darius, and, in consequence, had many more columns and more and larger side rooms. Two of these side rooms were also provided with columns ; none of those in the palace of Darius have this decoration. These columns, with their peculiar capitals, consisting of double bulls, "griffins" or horses, must have been very effective, although, as already said, nothing like the systematic arrangement and attention to proportion characterizing the Greek entablature is perceptible.

The tiles found at Susa, and certain notices in the literatures of other races, enable us to form a conception of the general appearance of both the interiors and the exteriors of these palaces. The architect cared more for color than for form, although the forms are by no means inelegant, and the color was attained not only by the tiling, but also by the lavish use of hangings and of gold or silver, both in the building and in its furniture. Indeed, it is to the upholsterer rather than to the architect proper that the interiors must have been chiefly indebted for their effect, as well as for whatever measure of comfort may have fallen to the lot of the occupants. However,

Persepolis was probably occupied only during the summer months.

The reliefs found in various places on the platform are characterized, for the most part, by a tendency to harmonize the subjects with the uses of the structure, or part of the structure, where they are placed; the guard rooms bear reliefs of guards, the staircases processional subjects, the interiors scenes connected with the personal or domestic life of the monarch, etc. They show little inventive power; the best that can be said of them is that the space is generally treated with judgment; in particular, there is a remarkable absence of overcrowding with detail, such as the rather pompous life of the monarch might have readily suggested to the designer. In short, they show good taste as far as they go, and do not seem to imply so much the absence of talent as the complete lack of creative impulse. The same men who repeated the same inscription over and over again in different parts of the same edifice, took no pains to secure special artistic excellence in their reliefs. But it is for this very reason that the reliefs are all the more important and helpful to the student of the interrelations of the various parts of the platform; they can apparently be trusted to give clear evidence as to the precise uses of the various structures or parts of structures.

The buildings on the northern part of the platform differ in some particulars from those just mentioned. None of them seem to have had any side rooms, and none seem to have been used as residences, although one is in so ruinous a condition that no conclusions can be drawn as to its original character. At (2) is a great Propylæa. At (7) is a vast open portico, without traces of walls, but with many great columns; some of these are still standing and form the most conspicuous feature in all views of the platform. At (6) is another hall, also of vast dimensions, and also originally provided with columns, but differing from the last in being walled, and from the palaces on the southern part of the middle terrace, in having doors on three of its sides, which apparently gave free access from the level of

the platform. On the fourth side, that facing the north, was a pillared portico, flanked with guard rooms and decorated with colossal bulls. At (5) is the heap of ruins spoken of above, of whose original character nothing can now be determined, but, as another colossal bull was found there, it must have been a building of some importance. It may have served as a propylæa to (6); it will be remembered that there are at least two such edifices on the platform.

It is evident, now, that the platform was divided — and this arrangement is probably due to Xerxes — into a portion open to the public, with or without limitations, and a larger portion reserved more particularly for the residence of the monarch and accessible only to those connected with the court and its service.

It will be observed that the staircase at (1) was, as already mentioned, the only means of access from the plain. It is remote from the residences proper, securing to these, therefore, a certain degree of privacy, which, it may be conjectured, must have been increased by the reservation of a space in the plain close under the brink of the terrace. Otherwise curious persons could have come immediately under the walls of the palaces, and especially of the palace of Artaxerxes Ochus (13). Comparatively few persons could have had ready access to the area of the middle terrace, at least to that portion of it between the dotted lines on the diagram and an imaginary north and south line running through the Propylæa at (8); for, as is well known, the Persian kings saw little or nothing of social life. That Xerxes should have made such provisions as to secure for his residence a greater degree of privacy than that apparently possessed by the palace of Darius is fully in accordance with his character.

The limited number of persons provided for by these arrangements explains the small dimensions of the structures used as residences, which, at first sight, compare so unfavorably with modern royal residences.

It has been asked, where were the quarters for the women?

There certainly seems to be no difficulty on this score. Of the buildings of Darius, indeed, except that he built the palace at (10), it is certain that we know nothing whatever; some may have been removed at the time of the changes, whatever their nature, made by Xerxes. The latter monarch had, at any rate, two palaces, — the one attributed by him to Darius, and the one built by himself, — to say nothing of the undated structure at (11) on the diagram, and these two palaces alone would seem to have provided ample room, when the character of family life in ancient times is taken into account; and above all, if I am right in supposing that the whole southerly part of the middle terrace was kept fairly private.

No explanation, furthermore, has ever been given of the original character of the two mounds at (9). They, or the structures once occupying their site, must, at all events, have served as a screen, and rendered the part of the terrace south of them, already the most remote part of the platform, still more retired.

Finally, I would repeat what I have already hinted at with reference to the south terrace. The natural destination of this, at and after Xerxes' time, would seem to be to furnish quarters for attendants. The arrangements in the time of Darius may have been very different.

I return to the public part of the platform. At (3) on the diagram is the grand staircase giving access from the north to the central terrace, of very peculiar, and, when the character of the reliefs is considered, of very significant construction. It consists of four flights, all leading up to the general level of the central terrace ($f-g-h$), the two flights to the north (B and C) being much nearer to each other than the two to the south (E and D), so that the space f between the heads of the two former flights is much shorter than $g-h$ between the two latter. The four spandrels formed by the ascending lines of the four flights are each filled with the relief of the "Lion and the Bull," so often repeated on the other stairways of the terrace, and having no local significance. There are, however, sculptures peculiar to this staircase. These occur chiefly in the spaces on

the perpendicular wall just under the points where the letters *f* *g* and *h* are placed.

On the wall front under *f*, and so between the staircases B and C, are colossal guardsmen in procession; under the points *g* and *h*, and therefore between the staircases D and B, and E and C, respectively, are rows of figures representing various subject nations bringing tribute. Mingled with these are guardsmen and officers. There are also three inscription tablets, on the wallface under *g*, *h*, and *f*. In all probability these were intended to receive inscriptions of identical content in the three official languages used in the Empire, but only one, that towards the west, has been filled up. This inscription is written in Old Persian.

Not far from the summit of these stairs, at the point indicated by (4), is a solitary column, the only one remaining of a group; this group of columns is close to the Great Hall of Xerxes (7), but does not seem to have formed any integral part of it, unless it be regarded as a sort of propylæa. This Hall seems to have been a vast open portico, not merely having had no small rooms, but also, as already said, showing no trace whatever of walls.

It is not difficult now to form a hypothesis as to the functions and relations of the structures on the north part of the platform. We may conjecture that the public, or some portion of the public, had free admission to the north terrace, gaining access by the stairs at (1), and passing through the Propylæa at (2). Under certain circumstances, perhaps, as has been conjectured, on the occasion of great banquets, the public, or the chosen public, would be admitted to the Hall of a Hundred Columns at (6), the public entrance being from the north, through the guarded portico. This destination of that structure is sufficiently clear from its reliefs, representing the king on his throne supported by subject nations. The doors on the other three sides, where there are no guard-chambers, might serve as entrances for the court and for attendants. Besides, in the case of a numerous assemblage, and in warm weather, they would naturally aid in ventilation.

The more public part of the platform seems to have been bounded on the south by the northern wall of the middle terrace, but the use of the staircase has been easily conjectured from the character of the reliefs on the grand staircase at (3). As the Hall of a Hundred Columns serves the purpose of the banqueting apartment, so the dispositions here furnish the equivalent of a throne room, particularly at the times of reception of tributary embassies. On this supposition the king himself must have occupied a place near the now solitary column at (4); guards must have been placed on the shorter landing as well as on both the staircases (B and C) leading up to it, and probably also between the king and the line of procession. The visitors, accompanied by guardsmen and officials, may be supposed to have passed up one of the flights leading to the longer landing (*g-h*), to have traversed this landing, laying down their tribute before the monarch, and then to have passed down the other flight, without turning, thus defiling between two lines of soldiery. As the west staircase (D) is the only one provided with its proper inscription, and as this could be seen, in front, only by persons approaching the foot of this staircase, it may be conjectured that this was the one used for the ascent. Besides, had the directions of the ascent and descent been the reverse of those indicated above, the two lines would have come into collision somewhere near the southeast angle of the Propylæa, unless, indeed, the descending column immediately returned to the plain by the stairs at (1). It is of course impossible to conjecture what minor barriers may have then existed on the platform, but a propylæa must have been built as a means of access, and it is difficult to believe that it was then possible to move freely around its exterior, or to pass without impediment directly from the stairs at (3) to those at (1).

As to the vast portico at (7), the so-called Great Hall of Xerxes, it seems to me that the most probable purpose of such a structure, open on all sides and occupying the boundary line between the more public and the more private parts of the platform, was to provide a post for a very large body of guards.

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